

California Towhee *Pipilo crissalis*

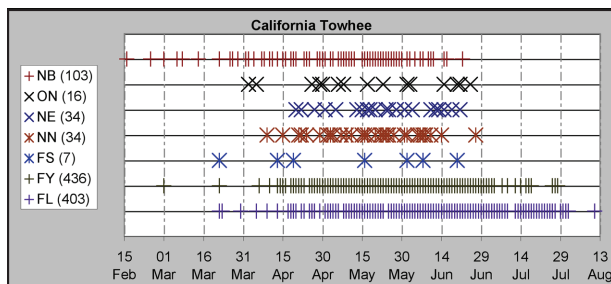
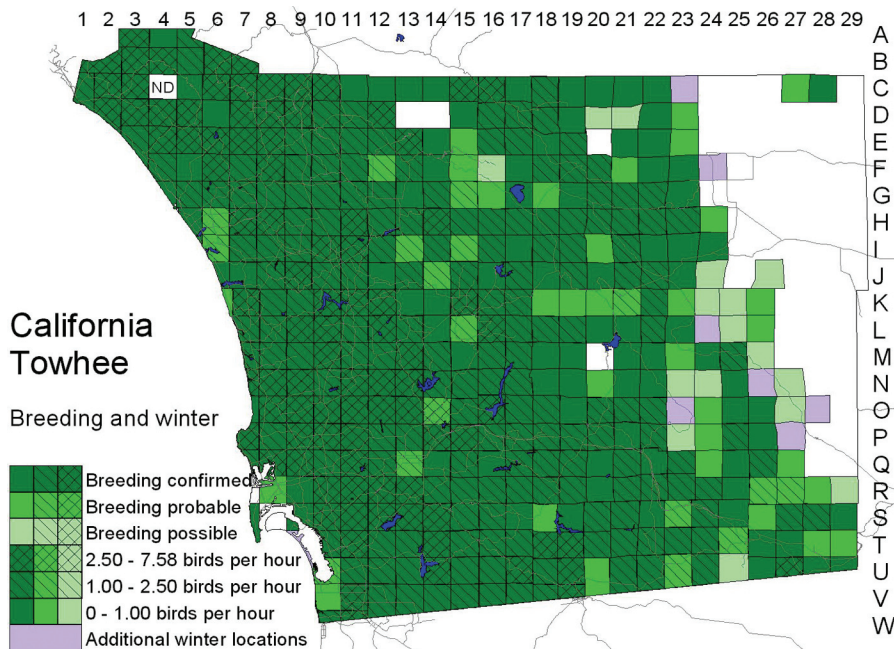
The California Towhee is one of the dominant birds of coastal sage scrub. It is also common in chaparral (especially where broken by openings), riparian scrub, high-desert scrub, and the undergrowth of riparian and oak woodland. It is famed for its sedentary nature, mated pairs remaining for life in one territory. The California Towhee adapts fairly well to urban life, readily moving into parks and residential areas wherever these offer a certain density of shrubbery for nesting and unpaved ground surface for foraging.

Breeding distribution: The California Towhee covers almost the entire coastal slope of San Diego County except the Coronado peninsula, the most densely built parts of cities, and the forested summits of the highest mountains. Even in the long-developed parts of San Diego, there remains enough habitat for the towhee in every atlas block except R7 and S8, incomplete squares that lack any native scrub. The species is distinctly more numerous in the coastal lowland than at higher elevations, but it was still found in every foothill and mountain square surveyed except D14 (Palomar Mountain), E20 (summit of Hot Springs Mountain), M20 (Cuyamaca Peak), and O23 (Mount Laguna).



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

On the east slopes of the mountains the California Towhee is uncommon but widespread even in sparse desert-edge scrub. Only in creosote bush scrub on the desert floor does it drop out completely. Mesquite thickets offer it good habitat in canyons (maximum 25 at Vallecito, M25, 27 April 1998, M. C. Jorgensen), yet it is absent from the mesquite bosque on the floor of the Borrego Valley. The birds also range into the Santa Rosa Mountains (maximum three on the east slope, C28, 2 May 2000, R. Thériault) and Vallecito Mountains (maximum seven on the east slope of Whale Peak, L26, 12 April 2000, J. R. Barth).



Nesting: Unlike the Spotted Towhee, the California Towhee seldom places its nest on the ground; more usually it builds in low shrubs, sometimes even in the outer canopy of coast live oaks. The birds commonly use ornamental shrubs and fruit trees as well as native plants. Like many other resident birds, most California Towhees begin laying in the third week of March; 31 egg sets collected 1891–1953 range from 16 March to 12 July. During the atlas period, we found a few birds starting two to three weeks earlier, especially in the wet year of 1998. Our

earliest observations of courtship behavior were 8 February 1998 (a rainy day—female soliciting copulation in Rancho Cuca, F14, P. Unitt), of nest building 16 February 2001 (near Puerta La Cruz, E18, K. J. Winter), and of fledglings 22 March 1998 (Encanto, S11, P. Unitt).

Winter: Only two records imply winter dispersal of California Towhees out of their breeding range by the width of even one atlas square: two at Borrego Springs (F24) 19 December 1999 (P. K. Nelson) and one in Carrizo Valley east of Highway S2 (O28) 7 February 2002 (P. D. Jorgensen). There is only one record from the Salton Sink (Patten et al. 2003).

Conservation: With its ability to use nonnative habitats, the California Towhee has largely avoided the negative effects of urban sprawl that afflict many other birds that prefer sage scrub. Bolger et al. (1997) identified it as a species insensitive to habitat fragmentation in San Diego, and this is corroborated by our atlas results. High-density development can eliminate the towhee, as it has in some neighborhoods of inner-city San Diego. At the scale of our atlas grid, though, this effect is visible only in the species' absence from Ocean Beach (R7).

Taxonomy: The subspecies of the California Towhee found in coastal southern California and northern Baja California, *P. c. senicula* Anthony, 1895, is a prime example of the subspecies whose ranges define the San Diegan district of the California Floristic Province. Like the Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Bewick's Wren, Oak Titmouse, and others in this area, it is distinguished by its darker color in comparison to the other subspecies both farther north and farther south.